Architecture as Transition: Creating Sacred Space

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Abstract — Architecture has the power to transfigure. A building can make us feel joy, sadness, powerful or weak. Spirituality and sanctitude are some of the supreme qualities that can be expressed through architecture. These attributes and spaces that express them also play an essential role in our existence. They are experienced across many lands, cultures and with many convictions and practices. The pith of spirituality is to discover our true selves and the real nature of consciousness. My argument maintains these vigorous experiences should not be limited to only a certain group of users, but rather should be open for all to experience. This type of architectural expression should not be restricted to merely religious uses or rules of religion and embrace multitudes of people, beliefs, uses and qualities. This research explores the ides of sacred space and what it means in an urban context. It also inquires how to create a physical space that can be the doorway or transition to spiritual communication with another realm of being, that can allow healing and learning to take place and can provide an escape from the chaos of the profane world, the everyday world that surrounds them at all other times. This research is an architectural exploration of designing spaces that seek these qualities of the sacred.

Index Terms — Sacred space, Spirituality, Religion, Divine, Healing environment

I. INTRODUCTION

The search for the sacred is brimming with incredible distractions and challenges. The earth itself is at the risk of extinction. Forests are being depleted. Incurable diseases kill hundreds of people. Over half the world’s population suffer from severe water scarcity. Major concerns like pollution, poverty, domestic abuse are being taken for granted. Terrorism lurks everywhere. Where do vagrant, hungry, abused and stressed out people find a sense of the sacred in their lives? Nerves on the edge, pressures push stresses to the limit; a desecrate world surrounds us. It is a chaotic environment that doesn’t end at the door to the workplace; people seek to escape it once in a while, but how and where?

People seek a peaceful and serene space amidst all this chaos of the city. It is here that people can connect with a side of themselves that the city doesn’t allow and can learn about new things, meet new people, and explore new aspects of themselves. In this place, one can unite their mind, body and spirit into renewed and healed state. What and where is this place?

Despite a mass of religions and belief systems, which have their own cultural and regional qualities, spirituality plays a fundamental role in our lives. This worldly connection between the human and the divine is among the most powerful communications possible. It is this connection where people find that architecture, in the form of sacred space, plays a crucial role in the realm of our religious and spiritual worlds.

Each person experiences space differently, dependent upon elements such as feelings, memories, backgrounds and values. However, for a person of faith, no matter what that faith may be or what religion they may be part of, sacred space serves a serious set of functions in their lives. These functions include providing location within which people can escape the ordinary in order to communicate and connect with the divine, their spiritual selves. Other functions could be to provide a place for healing.

The sacred space is a break or transition between the profane world of the non-sacred and the world of the divine. It provides a space for the physical, human, and the spiritual to connect. Sacred space builds an environment where one can escape the profane world and enter into spiritual consciousness.

II. RELATED WORK

A. Case study

1. JULIA MORGAN’S CHAPEL OF THE CHIMES, OAKLAND, CA

Built-in 1909, was the first building in the world to be used as both a columbarium and mausoleum. It was redesigned by Julia Morgan in 1928. The space is calm and quiet, and it is meant to elicit feelings of peace and tranquility, painting the building as one that represents light and beauty instead of darkness and death. The space is calm and quiet, and one can feel peace as they explore the labyrinth of the niches surrounded by fountains, gardens and trees. Courtyard gardens constantly keep the folks connected with nature. The degree of sanctity of this space is essentially tied to personal memories. The threshold of this sacred space is important as it separates the outer world from the inner world. Architect beautifully designed the meditation chapel as dark space, where the only light that enters is from the entrance and a small number of colored glass skylights. The space is followed by the series of countless number of
water features. The sound of running water holds the potential to calm the mind.

Fig. 1. Chapel of the Chimes, Oakland, California

2. THE BAUGHMAN CENTER, UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

The Baughman Center is a breathtaking, elegant contemplation space in the core of the University of Florida campus. It is open to the public for self-introspection on weekdays. The exterior walls of the center are made of Floridian cypress stained which reflects the natural surroundings and these reflective glass envelopes the meditation pavilion to mirror the landscape. Architecture submerged in its natural surroundings.

Fig. 2. Baughman Center, University of Florida

3. KOL SHOFAR, TIBURON, UNITED STATES

Kol Shofar is a dynamic assemblage rooted in the enduring values of Jewish traditions while embracing innovations that enrich contemporary Jewish life. It is encircled by eucalyptus trees and grassy hills. It feels very accessible and psychologically that’s important, especially for people who are not as nimble. Susie Coliver redesigned this synagogue. It is a Jewish synagogue but has connected community of many faiths. Along with any music, light... While entering the sanctuary light seeps through gaps in the walls of this curved hallway along with the music. One can feel this as they emerge at the end of the entryway into an open round space. Not only can people see one another clearly in the round, they can also see modifications taking place outside. Skylights are also provided so that they can start new day by the virtue of being able to see the stars. Another important element for the assemblage was making sure everyone could hear each other which is a very significant element of a sacred space. The round space serves to reinforce this communal spirit and also challenges the idea that the leader is the focal point. Architect Susie Coliver says the asymmetry is intentional. If it were symmetrical, there would be a proposition that perfection is attainable, which we know it is not. Architect hopes people who come to this sacred space take this asymmetry back outside with them.

Fig. 3. Kol Shofar, Tiburon, US

III. ATTRIBUTES OF A SACRED SPACE

Architecture is the first pioneer on the road towards the adequate realization of inner self. Besides the range of buildings and design approaches in the effort to create a sacred space where a man can feel spirituality, there can be found some common design equipments that help to create the soul-stirring experience. The following discusses some of these parameters:

- Threshold- The portal or threshold is the path way into the sacred space, which helps to separate the space from the outer world and invites the person to step inside. A threshold can be created with a hardscape such as a gate or a portico, or with simple planting. In an urban context, a fast-paced, tumultuous and chaotic surroundings can be juxtaposed against an inner sacred space whose characteristics is a peaceful, calm and quiet environment. The importance of the threshold is that it acts as a mediator between these two contrasting spaces. Thresholds can differ in its design but its role remains the same.

- Space and Volume- Space, whether of the individual or the universal, holds a unique quality of experiencing. It is hypersensitive, besides being super feasible. Sense of surroundings defines the
space as separate and apart from the overall outside environment. Visitors who enter the space feel though they are entering into a room. There are natural or man-made boundaries that portray the space within the greater environment. These boundaries provide a tenuous feeling of shelter, enabling people to feel safe and enjoy their time spent in the space. Architectural form is the medium of contact between mass and space. Every form conveys a certain meaning. It is important to understand how form can convey a spiritual meaning. Certain shapes and forms are traditionally associated with certain meaning.

- Scale and Proportion- Scale and proportions have always played a crucial role in sacred architecture. Deciding the scale of a sacred space is a common design matter of concern. Some merge into the fabric of the neighboring community and landscape; others stand out as landmarks, easily recognized for their special purpose. Generally, the sacred spaces take a monumental scale to create an atmosphere of terror, mystery and magnificence. By coming into such spaces, whose proportions are inhuman, the visitor has a chance to enter a mindset of supremacy. This brings up an absurdity because a person is experiencing a space and possibly transcending the mundane plane using the material world as the catalyst for such a change of mindset. When well-executed, these extreme proportions are so pure that there is little that can influence their sacredness.

- Light and Shadow- Light and shadow are an important part of the sacred architecture. Natural light and artificial light both have a strong effect on the atmosphere of a sacred space. Depending on the design, light and shadow are used to light up things for individuals to see and understand or kept things in the dark just beyond the imagination. Understanding light and shadow as a design equipment allows the architect of a sacred space the ability to hide or reveal what he/she chooses the occupant to see. This reveals a quiver of possible experiences, ranging from directing individuals to have a focal point or bewilderment of one's surrounding. Light within a sacred space is also as a unit connected to memory because a lot of times the most memorable things from a sacred space is the quality of the light or an enlightened oracle of the space.

- Engagement of the Senses- Senses are the primary equipment we have to gather information from our external environment. Within a sacred space, the discrete engagement of the five senses of an individual is a simple and effective way to place them into a mindset that is conducive to deeper thoughts or meditation. If senses are controlled to a particular object, the mind follows.

- Color- Color is an essential of a sacred space. In reference to sacred spaces, color theory could offer designers with a framework for understanding the possible effects and behavior of particular colors on the occupant. A sacred space in a remote, dismal village might use warm colors like reds and yellows to stimulate the inhabitants, triggering an opposite experience from their everyday life. A sacred space in a bustling city might use cool colors like blues to relax and calm the lives of the fast-moving urbanites. The key component is to create a contrasting experience to the contextual norm for people to immediately understand that the space is not mundane.

- Approach- The external and internal voyage into a sacred space begins with the approach. The approach not only has an external demonstration but also can be the beginning of an inward journey into the internal sacred space. Though not demonstrated in a conventional architectural manner, in this case, the material elements of the sacred space is the body. The inward sacred space also is a function of time and space being that the inward journey may take whole life for a person to achieve its destination.

- Connection with nature- The physical demonstration of architecture comes from organic nature. Materials used for construction like wood and stone all started as a part of a complete ecosystem. These materials were then reconstituted into a matrix to take on a new life. When an individual occupies an architectural space that is connected to the natural world, he/she experiences being part of a logical and amicable place. Generally, a person’s mind is calmer and quieter when they are connected to nature, whether walking, sitting etc. Research has shown that being outside in sunlight actually keeps a person’s state of joyful and happy.

- Memory- A person’s memory of their childhood experiences in relation to sacred spaces largely correlates to their present thought of what makes something sacred. Based on their upbringing, they develop different concepts of what is sacred and what isn’t, and their memory thus becomes essential for future experiences of sacred spaces. When a person experiences a new space, whose characteristics are similar to a memorable sacred space they were once in, they begin to recall feelings and emotions of the previous sacred space they were in and they begin to ally the new spatial experience as sacred. In this way, memory, sacredness, and architecture all bond together. Memory not only pertains to an individual but also brings up the idea of communal memories. Individuals receive sacred memories from their communities rather than directly undergoing the events recalled, and these memories shape not
IV. SCOPE OF RESEARCH

The main objective of conducting the study is to explore the idea of sacred space and what it means in urban context. The study will investigate the aspects which help in creating a sacred space. This study is also in response to most people not feeling welcome or comfortable visiting a sacred space that is associated with a particular religion that is different from their own. This research will help in building a sacred space which will be open to all those who desire to use it, and will provide the opportunities to both meet a diversity of people who are different than themselves and also to learn about other religions, cultures, etc. The study will be helpful in providing a space for healing, learning and expanding one’s mind to other people and other ways of living.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The evidence-based on researches and the pilot study of the sacred space that suggest need to create a sacred space that would provide a setting for all of these activities and more to occur. Not only a sacred space that allows for an individual or group to connect with the divine, but also for individuals and groups to connect with each other and discuss their sacred lives. As a result, they could learn more not only about other people and faiths that differ from their own but also, they could learn about themselves. This also provides a space for healing. All the data collected so far is analyzed thoroughly. It has been observed that the following characteristics are important in order to create a sacred space-

- Threshold
- Space and Volume
- Scale and Proportion
- Light and Shadow
- Engagement of the Senses
- Color
- Approach
- Connection with Nature
- Memory

The above-mentioned attributes should be incorporated in creating a sacred space so that one can escape the ordinary world and enter into spiritual consciousness.

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